

# Clinicians' views on palliative sedation for existential suffering: a systematic review and thematic synthesis of qualitative studies

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## Introduction

Palliative sedation is a pharmacological intervention aimed at providing relief to intolerable, refractory symptoms in terminally ill patients. Physicians employ palliative sedation to diminish distress, and to control pain and symptoms when other medical treatments fail. Palliative sedation is mostly used for alleviation of physical pain and whether it should be used for mainly existential suffering is a matter of controversy.

## Objectives

To systematically review the peer-reviewed literature surrounding the views of clinicians in regards to palliative sedation for predominantly existential suffering in terminally ill patients, and to address the favourability of palliative sedation for existential suffering with and without physical suffering.

## Methods

A comprehensive literature search was conducted in March 2016 with Ovid Medline, Embase, Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials, Ebsco CINAHL and PsycInfo databases.

Primary studies dealing with palliative sedation for existential suffering were found with studies on clinicians' views manually selected. A thematic synthesis [1] was carried out with the help of a tagging software [2] on qualitative studies identified. Quantitative portions of the studies' results were summarized narratively.

## Results

Of the 129 studies retrieved, 9 were included after initial screening. With examination of full-texts, 7 were found relevant, of which 1 was a focus group study, 4 were interviews, and 2 were vignette-surveys. All 7 were qualitative studies of which 4 also have a quantitative component. We found an overall general disapproval among clinicians for administering palliative sedation for mainly existential suffering without refractory physical symptom. Seven studies included:

Author (Year)	Country	Participants	Type
Shapiro B (2014)	USA	5 physicians	Interviews
Papavasiliou E et al (2014)	USA, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Norway, UK, Israel, Japan, Canada	21 physicians, ethicists, sociologists, nurses, scientists	Interviews
Beauverd M et al (2014)	Switzerland	77 physicians	Vignettes-surveys
Blondeau D et al (2005)	Canada	124 physicians & parhmacists	Vignettes-surveys
Anquinet L et al (2014)	Belgium, Netherlands, UK	35 physicians	Interviews
Swart SJ et al. (2014)	Netherlands	35 physicians, 36 nurses	Interviews
Rietjens JAC et al (2009)	Netherlands	24 physicians	Focus groups

## Conclusions

Our systematic review of the literature indicates that majority of clinicians are against administration of palliative sedation for mainly existential suffering or for the lack of physical symptoms. Most clinicians would consider palliative sedation for existential suffering only when intractable physical symptoms coexisted.

## References

1. Bearman M, Dawson P. Qualitative synthesis and systematic review in health professions education. *Med Educ.* 2013;47(3):252-60.
2. Provalis. QDA Miner Lite. QC: Montreal: Provalis Research; 2016 [Available from: <http://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/freeware/>]